

# Historiographies of Sikh Martial Traditions



Aakriti Kohli

**Constructing the Ideal Sikh:  
Historiographies of Sikh Martial Traditions**

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**Introduction**

My research questions are framed as an inquiry into the representation of Sikh identity as monolithic, seamless and organic. In this paper I hope to unravel the historical and social processes as well as agentic actions, which lead to a particular formation of Sikh martial masculinity.

The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), is the body which manages the religious institutions of the Sikhs in India. In March 2016, the Rajya Sabha passed the controversial Sikh Gurudwaras Act (Amendment) Bill which seeks to bring changes in the Gurudwaras Act 1925. This amendment seeks to disenfranchise Sehajdhari Sikhs from participating/voting in the SGPC elections.<sup>1</sup>

This move, to alienate a group of people who do not conform to the hegemonic template of who is a Sikh, is deeply enmeshed in the project of constructing an ideal, normative Sikh, defined by the dominant groups from within the community, wielding religious and political power, through a certain reading and interpretation of scriptures, and more recently, through religious jurisprudence. This current development becomes crucial in exploring and unravelling the historical processes which have led to the formation of an exemplar Sikh identity. Conjunctively, the politics of the production of normative identities through the apparatuses of the state and religion is closely associated with the production of hegemonic masculinities among the Sikhs.

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*Chidya naal main baaz ladava,  
Tabhi Guru Gobind Singh naam kahawa*

(I will make the sparrows' fight with hawks, only then will I be called Guru Gobind Singh)<sup>2</sup>

This epoch-making phrase, taken from *Bachitra Natak*, which forms an important part of the Dasam Granth, is etched in popular memory. <sup>3</sup> The film *Border* (1997) appropriates this phrase in the backdrop of the India-Pakistan war of 1971. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Punjab Regiment is stationed at the Longewala post in the Thar Desert, Ramgarh, Rajasthan, and after the declaration of war, finds itself inadequately reinforced. The option available is either to hold out against Pakistan's mechanized infantry or flee from the post. In the midst of debating on this decision, the film shows Subedar Ratan Singh, who quotes this phrase to convince Major Kuldip Singh Chandpuri, that the regiment can bravely face the assault, and further reiterates that when Guru Gobind Singh ordained that a sparrow can fight a hawk, then Ratan Singh believed that they are far more superior and capable as humans. In a cinematic portrayal of poetic justice, Subedar Ratan Singh, sacrifices himself while saving his regiment, clearly placing an emphasis on bravery, valour and martyrdom.

This dominant perception of Sikhs as martial, brave and willing to sacrifice is reflected in popular culture at large. By extension and association, Punjab, seen as the homeland of Sikhs, finds itself venerated as the land of the brave, of the land of the lions, if you like. This idea of the Sikh identity and Sikh masculinity in particular is a very real form of consciousness which does continue to define, shape and configure Sikh masculinity and

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performance of the male self and are ideas in which Sikh men root their identity. While this particular masculine performance does draw its strength from religious sanction, it can also be traced to a very complicated relationship with the British in the colonial period. How does one then understand the formation of Sikh identity, of the cultural transformation of Sikhism and Sikh identity, of how they are positioned as oscillating between a continuum of the spiritual and the martial? More importantly, how does one attempt critical scholarship of Sikh martial tradition when identities seem to be projected as natural, organic and seamless? There seems to be a discourse of linearity, discouraging any investigation into the formation of Sikh identity. This hegemonic image of the Sikh identity, reproduced on the internet, in the Sikh organizations and in the consciousness of the community, squarely defines Sikh identity within the boundaries of the Sikh Rahit Maryada, the Khalsa code as well as the teachings of the Sikh Gurus.<sup>4</sup> Hence the dominant narrative, which requires others to conform to it, seems to flatten differences, conflicts and contestations in the formation of this identity, and the competing groups within Sikhism. The need perhaps is to question conventional hegemonic interpretations of social history and social identity, and find newer ways of seeing, knowing and interpreting.

The primary question is to trace the emergence of Sikh martial tradition and examine the ways in which we can understand how masculinity was conceptualized in the religion. There is a tendency to depict a 'break' between the spiritual and the martial in Sikh studies, to suggest that from a saintly disposition it evolved into a more martial identity at the behest of the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh's inaugural of the Khalsa order.<sup>5</sup> How then can we also incorporate the agency of the community members

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(especially rural Jat peasants) in embracing and negotiating with their Khalsa identity, into our analysis? It is necessary to disrupt the linear narrative, which suggests that Guru Gobind Singh solely transformed the Sikhs into Singhs, in order to account for other trajectories that informed and shaped what might be called the 'militarisation' of the Sikh community.

The impetus to pursue these questions came with certain events in the past few years, which point to the martial and militarized Sikh identity, as well as the privileging of Khalsa identity as *the* Sikh identity, thereby making the Khalsa Singh identity as the dominant and often hegemonic representation of Sikhism.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on the Khalsa Sikh identity also leads to the effacing of other subordinate identities within the community, which are not considered the 'pure' or 'authentic' forms of Sikhism.

Specifically in the context of Sikh studies, I agree with works which argue that Sikh Studies needs to disassociate itself from the dominant interpretations of Sikh identity and tradition sanctioned by the Singh Sabha, and adopt an interdisciplinary approach, which frees it from the shackles of 'authentic', 'traditional' and 'sacred' readings.<sup>7</sup> We should shift our emphasis to become more inclusive, to recognize the diversity and multiplicity of narratives within the Sikh tradition and factor in the lived experiences of the community in our analysis.

It is in this spirit that I have undertaken my study on the formation of Sikh martial masculinity, while reading, examining, and extrapolating from the existing literature in the field.

The boundaries of Punjab have been re-drawn, re-imagined and re-constituted since many centuries and the region and the people of Punjab have seen successive invasions and annexation owing to its strategic location.<sup>8</sup> Hence various tribes and tribal chiefs in the region were engaged in combat with invaders, monarchies and even amongst themselves. Among the most notable tribes, which dominated the political field in Punjab in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century include the Baloch, Pathan, Kharal, Sial, Gakkhars, Awans, Janjua, Rajputs and the Jats.<sup>9</sup> The Jats, an agricultural tribe, from Sindh and Rajasthan, were present in sizeable numbers.<sup>10</sup> They would eventually constitute a huge percentage of Sikh followers in Punjab. This suggests that a militaristic tradition did exist in the region, much before the emergence of Sikh religion.

### **Evolution of the Sikh Religious Tradition**

The formation of Sikhism as a distinct religion did not follow a neat course of development. Sikhism as well as the community continually evolved over a period of time in response to specific historical and social circumstances. Sikhism is often described as one of the newest religions in the world and media images seem to suggest that it is primarily male, and the symbols of sword and the turban are its significant markers.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of the Western understanding of a religion, Sikhism clearly has a founder (Guru Nanak), its own holy scripture (the Guru Granth Sahib), its own places of worship such as Gurdwaras and pilgrimage centers and separate life-cycle rites. According to Census figures, in 1991, 80% of Sikhs in India lived in Punjab, and formed a majority of approximately 63% in the state.<sup>12</sup> Hence most Sikhs might trace their family origins to the state of Punjab.

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Many scholars have described the early beginnings of Sikhism in Punjab, mapping it from the last 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> The Sikh faith is understood in terms of the role of the ten successive spiritual Gurus. The laying of the foundation of Sikhism is attributed to Guru Nanak, who was born in the Rachna Doab in 1469 during the rule of the Lodhi dynasty. Khatri formed the major bulwark of his followers, which included traders, shop owners, merchants etc. Additionally, peasant cultivators, such as the Jats, were present in great numbers. From towns as well as the rural countryside, it is believed that the followers belonged to all classes and castes. Jat peasants from the Majha region dominated the social base of the Sikh community since they were known for their ideals of social equality and hence they were the first to be attracted by the Sikh gurus.<sup>14</sup> The dominance of the Jat community, and the huge numbers by which they came into Sikhism, led to the transformation of the community.<sup>15</sup> From merely a community engaged in spiritual and religious affairs, it was transformed into a community that was increasingly pre-occupied with material possessions, property and land. Since the Khatri were also a major part of the community, the trading community benefitted from the construction of religious centers, which also became centers of trade and commerce. Hence the Sikh gurus can in fact be called, “the harbingers of the emergence of the indigenous trading bourgeoisie in Punjab”.<sup>16</sup> The growth of the bourgeoisie is the most critical element in the emergence of a separate identity, for instance that of nationhood.

During the dissemination of Guru’s teachings as well as its understanding among the followers, the first impression of the Gurus, and specifically Guru Nanak comes from religious pictures where Guru Nanak was always represented as an “elderly man of

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saintly, meditative persona".<sup>17</sup> The paintings of Guru Nanak are often the reproduced from the portrayal of Sobha Singh, a Sikh artist.<sup>18</sup> A painting of Guru Nanak with a halo while he sits cross-legged is another popular representation by an artist, Bhagat Singh. A critical question here is that how do we study religious traditions? Do we privilege religious experiences, or the community's own oral, written and artistic tradition or simply undertake critical scholarly analysis of the religious tradition?

Before his death, Guru Nanak chose his successor from among his followers, in spite of the claims from his own sons. Guru Nanak's successors are sometimes referred to as Nanak 2, 3, 4 and 5. This is because they used the name 'Nanak' even in their own compositions.<sup>19</sup> Hence Guru Nanak's first four successors, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan Dev's compositions can be found in the Guru Granth Sahib.

The years 1539-1606 were the formative years in the evolution of the Sikh *panth*. Guru Nanak's next four successors worked within the "ideological and institutional parameters adumbrated by him".<sup>20</sup> The *panth* or the community steadily increased under the Guruship of Nanak's successors and it is evidenced by the slow institutionalization of the religion, in terms of its place of worship, its holy books, its markers, its rituals and practices etc.

### **The Guru Phase**

The successive Gurus after Guru Nanak were instrumental in developing the specific contours of Sikhism, moving away from a merely spiritual understanding to providing the community with a distinct religious identity in the form of separate rituals, scripture

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and a holy center. Additionally, social circumstances and the Gurus interface with the Mughal Empire influenced the course and form of Sikhism's path. There were specific events that shaped the community's sense of self and their religious identity, including the move towards a more martial orientation. More importantly, the contours of a Sikh martial identity developed during the successive Gurus, who contributed to the idea of the martial and the military in different ways at certain points of time, responding to the changing social, cultural and political climate of the times.

Guru Nanak's first four successors include, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan. All the gurus were Khatris from the rural countryside.<sup>21</sup> Guru Angad born in 1504 was the first Guru from 1504 – 1552 and is credited for developing the Gurumukhi script, for Punjabi.<sup>22</sup> Guru Angad adopted Gurmukhi to preserve and document Guru Nanak's compositions. Guru Angad, in order to avoid claims over Nanak's property by his family, searched for a new centre and moved to Khadur (in Amritsar) since Guru Nanak's son Sri Chand refused to acknowledge Guru Angad as Nanak's successor.<sup>23</sup> This is perhaps the beginning of rival claims within the Sikh movement, these and other claims would later feed into Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth Guru) declaring the end of person-centric Guruship.

Slowly the specific contours of the community's spiritual and religious identity began to emerge, as successive Gurus introduced and institutionalized certain ways of living, worshipping and being. This was important so as to build a repository of signifiers, icons and symbols, which would come to be associated with Sikhism. In-fighting within the *panth* perhaps began with heirs of the Gurus claiming legal property rights over

centres. After every successive Guru there were contentions over who would succeed and wield control over property.

Fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das born in 1534, and was Guru from 1574-1581. He is credited for making Amritsar the rallying center for Sikhs.<sup>24</sup> Guru Ram Das introduced separate Sikh ceremonies for occasions of death, birth and marriage in Amritsar.<sup>25</sup> Establishing of separate pilgrimage centers as well as rituals further worked in projecting Sikhism as a distinct religion. The introduction of separate ritual ceremonies was a significant move because firstly, it led to the incorporation of a distinct Sikh identity, secondly, it gave a sense of collective identity to the community and thirdly, it expressed gendered identity/self for the Sikhs. Guru Ram Das is also credited for composing *lavan* for the solemnization of Sikh marriage.<sup>26</sup> It is also believed that he was responsible for creating awareness among Sikhs, which would make them distinct from other religious communities and groups.<sup>27</sup> This was perhaps also done due to rising dissension among certain followers who did not respect the nomination of Gurus. Guru Ram Das then chose his youngest son, Guru Arjan as the successor. Hence the principle of nomination was continued but now was restricted to the family of Guru Ram Das. It is suggested that this was done to ensure that his successor could have legal rights over Ramdaspur.

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Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru born in 1563, and Guru from 1581-1606, was responsible for the construction of Harmandir Sahib or Golden Temple in Amritsar and installing the Adi Granth, and helping Sikhs develop a sense of identity. Guru Arjan is also considered as the first Sikh martyr, having been tortured by the Mughals.<sup>29</sup> The idea of the martyr also figures prominently in the formation of a martial identity among

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the Sikhs, an identity, which came to stand for fighting against perceived injustices and persecutions. I shall discuss this further in the context of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom in the subsequent paragraphs.

The Guru Granth Sahib was composed in a language, which was understood by the common people, and increasingly the Sikhs were becoming aware of how different their scripture was from those of other religions.<sup>30</sup> Slowly a distinctive Sikh identity was emerging, with their own scripture, place of worship, separate ceremonies for death, birth and marriage.<sup>31</sup> After the death of Akbar in 1605, it is believed that the Sikhs witnessed a tumultuous time, with their opponents and enemies making life difficult for them and within a few months of Akbar's death, Guru Arjan was martyred during the reign of Jehangir.<sup>32</sup>

Many have noted that the period between 1606 -1708 is a century of transformation of the Sikh *panth*.<sup>33</sup> Five Gurus succeeded Guru Arjan: Guru Hargobind (his son), Guru Har Rai (Guru Hargobind's grandson), Guru Har Krishan (Guru Har Rai's son), Guru Tegh Bahadur (youngest son of Guru Hargobind) and Guru Gobind Singh (Guru Tegh Bahadur's son).

Guru Hargobind born in 1595 was the sixth Guru from the period 1606-1644. The sixth Guru is generally seen as breaking away from the "pacifist tradition" of the Sikh religion.

<sup>34</sup> He was the first Guru who called on his followers to undertake martial training and also take up arms. This was primarily done to wage a war against the Mughal Empire.

He is also responsible for building Lohgarh, a fortress in Amritsar as well as the Akal Takht, a platform across Harmandir Sahib, as the throne of the "timeless God".<sup>35</sup> Guru

Hargobind, in many ways can be credited for 'militarizing' his followers in his

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encouragement to take up arms, in the display of weapons in his court, and in the performance of military prowess and the raising of an efficient army. Guru Hargobind was also known as '*Sacche Baadshah*' or the true king.<sup>36</sup> The construction of the Akal Takht, with Guru Hargobind presiding over the affairs of the community, much like the Mughal court, is indicative of the formation of an institutionalized form of militarized identity sanctioned by religious and spiritual beliefs. This reorientation of the community was in response to the increasing hostility from the Mughals, and this call to arms can be seen as an anti-state activity. Guru Hargobind encouraged his followers to become *Sant Sipahis* or Saint Soldiers, who would be saintly and take the name of God but at the same time had warrior-like abilities to defend the Sikh community and faith. In the next few sections I will demonstrate how the construction of the *Sant Sipahi* was different from the notion of the Khalsa Sikhs. Guru Arjan, Guru Hargobind and Guru Tegh Bahadur, can be seen as three central figures that feature prominently in the history and formation of Sikh martial identity.

During the ninth Guru's time, Guru Tegh Bahadur, who was the Guru from 1664-1675, there was conflict with the Mughal Empire, and he is believed to have been tortured to death and is considered a martyr.<sup>37</sup> It is said that Kashmiri Hindus who were facing persecution from the Mughal Empire approached Guru Tegh Bahadur who stood for their religious rights and embraced martyrdom. In Sikh imagination he was believed to be divine incarnation and his martyrdom was seen as wondrous, for he was believed to have achieved a marvelous feat by giving the supreme sacrifice. On the other hand it can be argued that the rhetoric of martyrdom employed after the death of Guru Tegh Bahadur in oral accounts points to the need to elevate the Guru as a charismatic personality who

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sacrificed his life for the greater good. In the history of martyrdom in Sikhism, the imagination of martyrdom as an inherent aspect of Sikhism was deliberately constructed and was instrumental in militarizing the community.<sup>38</sup> The Singh Sabha and the Tat Khalsa appropriated this rhetoric of martyrdom, to firmly locate the idea of the *shahid* in the history of Sikhism. In fact Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was the precursor to the creation of the Khalsa order. The tenth and the last Guru, his son Guru Gobind Singh was the guru from 1675 – 1708. Guru Gobind Singh abolished the practice of personal Guruship before his death in 1708.

After Guru Arjan's death, Guru Hargobind encouraged his followers to undertake martial activity and made use of two swords (*miri/piri*), according to the Sikh tradition, "one symbolizing his spiritual authority and other his temporal power."<sup>39</sup> There are three critical points where martial tradition in Sikhism seems to emerge: the principle of *miri* and *piri*, the cry of '*degheh tegh fateh*' (victory to the sword and cooking pot),<sup>40</sup> and the construction of *sant sipahi*, a life of meditation and contemplation and military readiness.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom was perhaps the impetus towards a more martial orientation of the Sikh religion. Guru Gobind Singh encouraged his followers to take interest in martial activity. His followers and visitors collected at Makhwal, and the numbers steadily increased, which gave the appearance of an "armed camp"<sup>41</sup> and can be seen as the slow militarization of the community. Guru Gobind Singh settled at Paunta, on the bank of river Jamuna. This was close to the territory of Garhwal, and the chiefs of Garhwal and Nahan had a long-standing conflict. Due to this, Guru Gobind Singh built a fortress and also "raised an efficient fighting force".<sup>42</sup> In 1688 when the

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chief of Garhwal invaded the territory of Sirmur, Guru Gobind Singh moved out of Paunta to battle them at Bhangani. The chief of Garhwal and other mercenary commanders were defeated after a bloody battle. After this, he adds that Guru Gobind Singh returned to Makhwal and found Anandpur in 1689. It is reported that his men were well equipped to fight and were well armed with bows, arrows and swords. The men who did not fight in the battle at Bhagnani were not allowed in the township of Anandpur, whereas the one who fought were “rewarded and patronized”.<sup>43</sup> Clearly martial masculinity or the willingness to fight for the faith was privileged. Meanwhile, the numbers in Anandpur continued to grow, and this displeased Aurangzeb who ordered various attacks, which were foiled due to rebelling hill chiefs who instead fought with the Mughal army.<sup>44</sup> This period saw many clashes.

It was Guru Gobind Singh who had said that after his death the human line of Gurus or person-centric Guruship would end and from then on the *panth* and the Granth (community and the book) would be the Gurus. It is generally believed that this was perhaps his way of ensuring that no further clashes within the *panth* take place, which might lead to the disintegration of the *panth*. However one can also speculate that Guru Gobind Singh recognized the problems associated with the tradition of martial masculinity and sought to end person-centric Guruship to perhaps re-orient the community to the more spiritual aspects of the religion and also wean them away from violence.

In the above discussion, I have briefly attempted to establish the relationship of the successive Gurus with the Mughal Empire as well as the internal dynamics and challenges in the Sikh movement, which shaped the community. Further it is the events

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such as the martyrdom of the two Gurus, hard posturing towards the Sikhs by the Mughals, infighting between the community and the need to make Sikhs a distinct community that translated into the development of the Khalsa identity. The history of the Sikh martial identity can be traced to the successive Gurus who reoriented the community in response to the changing social and political climate. The formation of a martial identity developed as a reaction to Mughal hostility towards the Gurus and the Sikh community. The call to take up arms, the performance of military prowess, and the display of arms and weapons point to the deliberate construction of a military persona, which was meant to pose as a threat and challenge to the Mughal state.

### **Emergence of the Khalsa and Martial Identity**

The emergence of a distinct martial tradition within Sikhism is usually attributed to Guru Gobind Singh who initiated the Khalsa order. However there is evidence of the fact that martial training existed right from the time of Guru Nanak. *Gatka*, a form of Sikh martial art, was taught by the Gurus and further practiced by *ustads* or masters who further taught it to their disciples.<sup>45</sup> This martial art form emerged in response to defending the faith or *dharam* and also the principle of *miri-piri* and that it is a style of fighting which involves the use of sticks and swords. Hence there is a stress on the spiritual as well as the temporal. In fact he argues that wrestling has had a long association with Sikhism, and later on Guru Hargobind encouraged his followers to train themselves in martial arts. While the Gatka martial art trained the practitioners into the art of fighting battle, controlling their mind and testing their bodily limits, it also served and continues to serve as a spectacular visual performance especially during sparring, training and contests. Guru Gobind Singh for instance instituted the festival of Holla

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Mohalla in place of the Hindu festival Holi, wherein Gatka martial art, contests around wrestling and swordsmanship and other military routines were performed at Anandpur Sahib. It is interesting to note that the term 'holla' is derived from the word 'halla' which means to create an alarm, noise or uproar. <sup>46</sup> These competitions and displays of physical prowess, bravery and skill, served as a spectacle of martial masculinity as well as training for the Khalsa for their future battles. In its present form however, it is said to have lost its militaristic fervor and urgency, but continues to retain its martial essence. <sup>47</sup>

The term Khalsa is derived from Arabic and means *khalis* or pure. During the Mughal rule, *khalsa* meant the land, which directly belonged to the Mughal ruler, hence *khalsa* in the Sikh context also referred to allegiance to the Guru directly and not the intermediaries or *masands*. <sup>48</sup> Propounding the use of physical force perhaps became necessary in the mind of Guru Gobind Singh. It is believed that on Baisakhi in 1699 in Anandpur, Guru Gobind Singh announced that all Sikhs would be his Khalsa. <sup>49</sup> The term Khalsa at that point was used for the Sikhs who were initiated by the Gurus themselves and not the *masands*. <sup>50</sup> Before the initiation of the Khalsa order, there were various labels/categories that were used to define Sikhs, with respect to various movements with the Sikh faith. Such as the Nirankaris, Nanakpanthis, Gursikh, Nirmal panth etc. The categories was relatively fluid, and it is only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that ideas around who is an 'authentic' Sikh came to be represented in the form of the Khalsa order, which sought to project a single image of what it meant to be Sikh. <sup>51</sup> In the early Guru period as well as in the *janam-sakhis*, there is no indication of a singular, unified image, but multiplicity of traditions and practices. On the hegemony of the Khalsa tradition over other Sikh

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identities, and its paradox, it is important to note how the assertion of Khalsa Sikhs as the dominant image of the community, also made it possible for other 'marginal' Sikh identities to exist, and be accepted and regarded as 'non-Khalsa'.<sup>52</sup>

It is generally believed that on the day of Baisakhi in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh instructed the first five who he initiated to adopt the Five Ks or *panj kakke*. These were five symbols, which became requisite for Sikhs. These were *kesh* (unshorn hair), *kangha* (comb), *kirpan* (sword), *kara* (iron/steel bangle) and *kaccha* (breeches). While the turban is not mentioned in the Five Ks, the turban came to assume significant importance in the lives of male Khalsa Sikhs. Earlier initiation ceremonies required Sikhs to drink the water, which has been used to wash the feet of Gurus. Guru Gobind Singh replaced it by using a *khanda* or double-edged sword, and stirring it in an iron bowl filled with water. Later his wife added sugar-puffs to sweeten it. During the initiation ceremony, the initiate has to drink the water while Guru Nanak's Japji and Guru Gobind Singh's Jap is recited.<sup>53</sup>

More importantly, the external appearance of baptized Sikhs made them readily identifiable and distinguishable from others and also helped in establishing a distinct religious identity.<sup>54</sup> It has also been argued that "masculine and martial Sikh look should be seen in the context of Guru Gobind Singh's call... in 1699, for conspicuous loyalty among his followers".<sup>55</sup> While Guru Nanak stressed upon internal reflection and rejected outward marking, Guru Gobind Singh's call seems to be the opposite.<sup>56</sup> This perhaps should be seen as a response to the prevalent political climate of those times.

While Guru Gobind Singh asked his Khalsa to keep their hair unshorn, however the hair had to be tied neatly in a topknot, and then covered, this was supposed to convey

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disciplined holiness.<sup>57</sup> The *kangha* is linked to the hair and is kept under the turban. The breeches are supposed to represent sexual restraint; the *kara* has been interpreted variously, seen as a link with God, to remind them to have good moral conduct, as a weapon in itself, and also as a restraint to the hand that wields the sword; the *kirpan* reminds them to fight for justice and their faith.<sup>58</sup> Additionally the Sikhs associate the *kirpan* with the term *kirpa* or grace to suggest its positivity rather than its conflation with terms such as ‘dagger’, which has negative connotations.

While the practice of *panj kakke* is considered to have begun with the inauguration of the Khalsa order, at that point only three items were mentioned (*kesh*, *kirpan* and *kaccha*).<sup>59</sup> It is only in a later version of the *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* that the five items are listed. This was under the influence of the Tat Khalsa and with the establishment of the Singh Sabha.<sup>60</sup> The early Sikh texts do not mention the *panj kakke*, however the reference to arms is evident.<sup>61</sup> The idea of the Five Ks was dynamic and it was in fact the five weapons that were mentioned. In the early Khalsa tradition, it was imperative to carry five weapons. The Khalsa were “commanded to pay particular respect” to the five weapons, that is, a sword, a bow, a musket, dagger and either a lance or quoit.<sup>62</sup> Since the colonial state banned carrying weapons, the five weapons were in many ways “replaced” by the *panj kakke* or the Five Ks.<sup>63</sup> This points out to how deeply connected the transformation of Sikh faith was with the idea of the martial and the military.

Additionally while it is argued that women can *also* perform this ritual, it continues to be a masculine one, with the *panj pyare* almost always being men, who initiate other men in the community into the martial Khalsa order, pointing to the gendering of identity in Sikh rituals. The symbolic figure of the *panj pyare* also refers to an aspect of

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the Sikh martial tradition that privileges the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the community and God. As I had argued earlier, the formation of gendered masculinity is also predicated upon practices in gender relations that influence identities and culture.

The sweetened water, stirred with the sword was believed to have magical and almost 'totemic' qualities of transforming the sparrows into hawks and Guru Gobind Singh has also been popularly represented in paintings with a white hawk/falcon perched on his hands or shoulder. It has also been said that traditionally two sparrows drank this water and went on to fight till their death. <sup>64</sup> Initiating warriors, this rite of baptism is variously referred as *khande di pahul* or *amrit sanskar* and *amrit chakhna*. Though there is some uncertainty about the exact procedure and details of the practice but the reconstruction and remembering is based on "Sikh perception" as well as details lay down by the Rahit Maryada Code. <sup>65</sup> Further after the initiation, every initiated had to say *Vaheguru ji da Khalsa, Vaheguru ji di fateh*, meaning that the Khalsa belongs to God, any victory is God's. It is also said that Guru Gobind Singh, named himself and other male members who got initiated as Singh (literally meaning lion) and women as Kaur (princess). <sup>66</sup> This was perhaps done to also do away with names, which pointed to the caste of a person, and also to make 'Singhs' distinct from others. This re-naming then seems to work through association and disassociation at the same time.

The Khalsa were to be the brave warriors who would fight for justice and in the name of God, who would not worship Hindu deities or follow the caste-system, additionally they would meditate on God's name, and they should not interact with dissenters within the Sikh *panth* who did not respect the succession of Gurus. <sup>67</sup> In terms of diet restrictions, the Khalsa had to abstain from tobacco, alcohol and *halal* meat. These dietary

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restrictions have been interpreted variously. While some scholars believe that *halal* meat was restricted because the procedure followed to slaughter the animal was considered inhuman, and tobacco and alcohol not permitted since they are inherently bad for health.<sup>68</sup> Some others however have argued that this was a strategic marking of boundaries, since consumption of *halal* meat and tobacco were associated with Muslims, and it was required to create an opposition to them.<sup>69</sup>

Further many Sikhs came to believe that Guruship was rested by Guru Gobind Singh in the Khalsa *panth* and in the Granth. However it is important to note that the confluence of Singhs with Khalsa happened after Guru Gobind Singh's death. Not every Sikh had initiated himself/herself in the Khalsa order or taken part in the *kande ke pahul* ceremony and did not follow the Five Ks religiously. As many others have argued, the Five Ks were a later practice, and that prior to this were the five *shastras* or weapons.<sup>70</sup> Hence the Five Ks were not followed as a practice universally or across all times.

Additionally, there were many Sikhs, who followed some or all the Five Ks, and called themselves Singhs but had not been formally initiated into the Khalsa order through the *khande ke pahul* ceremony and hence these Singhs were not Khalsa. One crucial point to remember is that, "All the Sikhs at the time of Guru Gobind Singh's death were not his Khalsa, and all his Khalsa were not Singhs. The difference between the Singh and the Khalsa ended with his death and the two terms became synonymous and interchangeable".<sup>71</sup> Guru Gobind Singh's death, lead to a consolidation of Khalsa identity around the label 'Singh', and hence in the projection of Khalsa identity as *the* Sikh identity, Singh identity became Khalsa identity. However the difference between the Sikh and the Singh remained. The political ideology of both Singhs and Sikhs were

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vastly different and the political ideology of the Singhs was an “essential part of their religious ideology”.<sup>72</sup>

The transition of the Sikh *panth* from ‘sparrows’ or serene devotees to ‘hawks’ or warriors can hence be traced to the martyrdom or *shahidi* of two of the Sikh Gurus. After their father’s death, Guru Hargobind and Guru Gobind Singh took steps to make the *panth* more martial.<sup>73</sup> Bhai Gurudas who spoke during the time of Guru Hargobind said that “the orchard of the Sikh faith needed the thorny hedge of armed men for its protection” and slowly the Khalsa component became the more dominant one.<sup>74</sup>

The battles fought in 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries by the Sikhs, and display of courage and tales of heroisms that circulated thereafter, solidified the Sikh commitment to martial ideals.<sup>75</sup> Additionally the figure of the *sant sipahi*, the holy warrior and saint soldier, was seen as an inspiration, to meditate in God’s name and wield arms when called upon to do so. Guru Gobind Singh wanted the community to become saint-soldiers, people who meditated in the name of God, were religious in their morality, but ready to take up arms to fight oppression and get justice.<sup>76</sup> In fact it has been remarked that the day of Baisakhi in 1699 can be seen as a “symbolic, physical, ideological and political” transformation of the community.<sup>77</sup> It is evident that armed resistance to the imperial state, by the Khalsa, a community of *sant sipahis* was envisioned. The creation or the birth of the Khalsa is perhaps the most critical and defining moment in the evolution of Sikhs. They acquired a distinctively martial character, with a distinct physical appearance. Khalsa martial masculinity, backed by religious and cultural sanction, was engaged in waging a battle against the state at this point.

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From the above discussion I have attempted to illustrate how Guru Gobind Singh initiated the Khalsa and how it was interpreted and re-told, through the *rahitnamas*. More importantly, I have attempted to highlight how Khalsa martial identity continually evolved and how specific attempts were made to fix this identity. It is also interesting to note how peasants, who formed the bulwark of the Khalsa community, re-interpreted, negotiated and accommodated the Khalsa norms depending on social and political factors as well as their individual considerations. As I have argued before, there is no 'a' Sikh masculinity, and the formation of Sikh martial masculinity, influenced by Khalsa norms, encapsulates only one form of masculinity. If we see masculinity as a set of gendered relations and practices, then the formation of Khalsa identity affects the body, identity and culture of the Sikhs. Khalsa martial identity is essentially embodied masculinity, which ascribes symbols and markers on the Khalsa body, and specifically the male body in this case. The *rahitnamas*, with their elaborate injunctions sought to construct Khalsa identity, which was circumscribed by what they could and could not do, disavowing Sahejdhari Sikhs and the others who did not conform to this template. Additionally, it promoted a culture of martial valour, which placed an accent on bravery, heroism and fight for 'justice'.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The question of defining who constitute 'Sehajdhari' Sikhs is contentious. The broad consensus is that Sehajdhari Sikhs believed in Guru Nanak but did not adopt the Khalsa principles, and the construction of their identities was less rigid or bound by the Khalsa norms (Singh and Fenech), such as not keeping their hair uncut, wearing the turban, or other outward visible signifiers which would mark them as Sikhs.

- <sup>2</sup> M.S. Siali & Suparna Rajguru, *Gurudwara in the Himalayas: Sri Hemkunt Sahib* (New Delhu: Hemkunt Publishers, 2001). This quote is from *Bachitra Natak*, a poetic composition in the Dasam Granth
- <sup>3</sup> The Dasam Granth is usually attributed to the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, and is considered distinct from the Adi Granth, the foremost Sikh scripture. There has been some controversy in attributing certain parts of the Dasam Granth to Guru Gobind Singh, with questions raised on the authorship of those portions, which refer to Hindu goddesses and mythology. However it continues to be regarded as an important scripture by the Sikhs, with its association firmly established with Guru Gobind Singh.
- <sup>4</sup> Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech "Introduction" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford University Press, 2014
- <sup>5</sup> W.H. McLeod. *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975 & 1996; Louis. E. Fenech. *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: Playing the 'Game of Love'*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000; Eleanor Nesbitt. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005
- <sup>6</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II.3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994; McLeod, W.H. *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975 & 1996; Dhavan, Purnima. *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; Singh, Pashaura. "An Overview of Sikh History" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014
- <sup>7</sup> Pashaura Singh. "An Overview of Sikh History" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014
- <sup>8</sup> For a description of pre-modern Punjab and successive invasions and conquests, development of cities, patterns of human settlement, and political changes see Grewal, J.S 1990. *The New Cambridge History of India II.3: The Sikhs of the Punjab*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>9</sup> Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*
- <sup>10</sup> H.A. Rose, Denzil Ibbetson, and Edward Douglas MacLagan, eds. *A glossary of the tribes and castes of the Punjab and North-West frontier province. Volume II*. Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing Punjab, 1911
- <sup>11</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> W.H. Mc Leod. *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975; ; J.S Grewal. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II.3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; Pritam Singh. *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy*. New York: Routledge, 2008; Eleanor Nesbitt. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh. *Sikhism: An Introduction*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2011
- <sup>14</sup> Singh. Pritam. *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy*
- <sup>15</sup> Mc Leod, W.H. *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*
- <sup>16</sup> Singh. Pritam. *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy*, 23
- <sup>17</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*, 17
- <sup>18</sup> Sobha Singh is a 20<sup>th</sup> century artist, who was known for his portraits of the Gurus. His painting *My Meditation on Guru Nanak* (oil color on canvas) has been reproduced and circulated in the form of contemporary images of Guru Nanak (Nesbitt 2005). He is also famous for his paintings of Sohni Mahival and Hir Ranjha (Sardar Harjeet Singh 2009)
- <sup>19</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*
- <sup>20</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*, 42
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Singh. Pritam. *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy*
- <sup>23</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> McLeod, W.H. *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*.
- <sup>26</sup> Sikh wedding ceremony is known as Anand Karaj and Lavan shabad, has four hymns and was composed by Guru Ram Das. The prospective bride and groom circumambulate around a sacred fire four times, while the hymns are read and sung during Anand Karaj (Kaur Singh 2011).

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- <sup>27</sup> J.S. Grewal. *Historical Perspectives on Sikh Identity*. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1997
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Fenech, Louis. E. *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: Playing the 'Game of Love'*
- <sup>30</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*
- <sup>31</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*
- <sup>32</sup> J.S. Grewal. *Historical Perspectives on Sikh Identity*. Patiala: Punjabi University, 1997
- <sup>33</sup> McLeod, W.H. *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*; Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*, Singh. Pritam. *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy*
- <sup>34</sup> Singh. Pritam. *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy*, 23
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> Dalbir Singh Dhillon. *Sikhism: Origin and Development*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1988
- <sup>37</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*
- <sup>38</sup> Fenech, Louis. E. *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: Playing the 'Game of Love'*
- <sup>39</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*, 64
- <sup>40</sup> This slogan is from the Dasam Granth and was appropriated by Banda Bahadur (Nesbitt 2005).
- <sup>41</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*, 73
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*, 74
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>45</sup> Kamalroop Singh. "Sikh Martial Art (Gatka)" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* edited by Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014
- <sup>46</sup> H.S. Singha. *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*. Delhi: Hemkunt Publishers, 2000
- <sup>47</sup> Kaushik Roy, eds. *The Indian Army in the Two World Wars*. Leiden: Brill, 2011
- <sup>48</sup> W.H. McLeod. *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004
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- <sup>50</sup> McLeod, W.H. *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*
- <sup>51</sup> Harjot, Oberoi. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> Kaur Singh, Nikky-Guninder. *Sikhism: An Introduction*. London
- <sup>54</sup> Harjot, Oberoi. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994
- <sup>55</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*, 49
- <sup>56</sup> McLeod, W.H. *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*
- <sup>57</sup> JPS Uberoi. *Religion, Civil Society and the State: A Study of Sikhism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996
- <sup>58</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*
- <sup>59</sup> W.H. *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> Anne Murphy. *Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012
- <sup>62</sup> W.H. *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*, 66
- <sup>63</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*, 54
- <sup>64</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*
- <sup>65</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*, 57
- <sup>66</sup> Kaur Singh, Nikky Guninder. *The Birth of the Khalsa – A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity*
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- <sup>70</sup> W.H. *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit*; Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*; Murphy, Anne. *Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition*



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<sup>71</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*

<sup>74</sup> Grewal, J.S. *The Sikhs of the Punjab: The New Cambridge History of India II*, 80

<sup>75</sup> Nesbitt, Eleanor. *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*

<sup>76</sup> Singh, Pritam. *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy*

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 24

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